

Developing a Comprehensive Health Service in Puerto Rico*

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GEOGRAPHICALLY Puerto Rico lies midway between the North and South American continents—a sentinel in the path of possible approaches of attack against the Western Hemisphere, but also a way station in the routes of peaceful communication, and a stepping stone to friendly relations between the Americas. Puerto Rico is, therefore, well fitted to become the meeting place of the peoples of this hemisphere for the furthering of common interests and the development of useful and highminded initiatives, especially in the field of public health administration and research.

Toward this end no enterprise could be more useful, no initiative more altruistic than the organization of technical and scientific work for the promotion and preservation of the public health. It is, therefore, with deep satisfaction and high hope that we have founded the Puerto Rico Public Health Association, whose self-imposed task is "to promote the public health by bringing together in closer association persons professionally engaged or interested in public health, by furthering their scientific advancement, by helping to spread public health knowledge, by stimulating and promoting research in public health and hygiene, by aiding in the adoption of legislation in the interest of public

health, and by volunteering assistance in times of stress or need."

The new association will not only thus come as a very welcome aid to the labors of the Health Department, but will also contribute to a better understanding between our fellow workers from the two continents. The association will also help materially to increase our efficiency in the field of public health, with benefit not only for our own Insular people but also for the nation as a whole and the continent at large.

Effective, conscientious training is absolutely essential for the success of any public health program that aspires to be of more than momentary significance. This is the reason why the Insular Department has always striven to engage the services of well trained men and women. To achieve this end, several years ago the Health Department organized a training center for nurses, sanitarians, and laboratory technicians, where short courses lasting from 6 to 8 weeks were given. In addition, through the facilities generously extended to it by the Rockefeller Foundation, the department was able to select a number of physicians, public health nurses, and sanitary engineers to hold fellowships for the purpose of pursuing graduate studies in the United States. These persons, upon their return to Puerto Rico, were placed in key positions within the department.

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As a natural result of these efforts, a Department of Public Health was created a year ago at the School of Tropical Medicine, San Juan, in coöperation with the University of Puerto Rico, Columbia University, and the Insular Department of Health, for the graduate training of physicians, sanitarians, technicians, and nurses. The curriculum embraces an extensive program, lasting a year, and includes the usual special courses to meet the needs of the students. The Public Health Unit at Rio Piedras has been reorganized to function as a modern experimental unit and as a specialized center for public health practice in the field. At the beginning of this scholastic year the facilities for the training of our personnel have also been extended by inaugurating a one year course of study for social workers in the College of Education of the University of Puerto Rico.

In Puerto Rico a low standard of living, with illness and widespread suffering, results from the geographical limitations, with extremely high population density, limited natural resources, lack of major industries, a large amount of unemployment and low wages. Such conditions are aggravated by the presence of a number of endemic diseases, notably malaria and hookworm, which are widely prevalent in tropical and subtropical districts. However, a large part of the illness on the Island is susceptible to control measures if funds become available.

The present Commissioner of Health was appointed during the year 1933, and a program was formulated which contemplated an attack on the fundamental problems responsible for a high mortality and considerable disease prevalence. Among other things this program provided for the extension of public health units under full-time medical officers to cover the 76 municipalities, organization of services for tuberculous patients based on sound

epidemiological principles, an island-wide program for treatment of venereally infected persons, extensive measures in rural sanitation and malaria control, and adequate hospital facilities for the care of the underprivileged population on the Island.

The first public health unit had been organized in the town of Rio Piedras during the year 1926; in 1933 there were 32 municipalities with this type of service, and during 1938 the entire territory of the Island, consisting of 76 municipalities, was being served by local public health units. In continental United States, where these units began to be organized more than 25 years ago, there were recently only 15 states with the entire territory covered by full-time health service, and in South American countries, although these agencies are rapidly being organized, their establishment is only in an early stage.

As a part of the tuberculosis program, hospital beds for the isolation of indigent patients were increased by 1,000, and treatment centers for ambulatory patients are being operated in 20 districts. An average of 75,000 fluoroscopies and 40,000 x-ray examinations are performed annually by trained physicians in these centers as a part of the case finding program. Approximately 3,000 tuberculous patients are hospitalized and over 5,000 are given artificial pneumothorax every year, with the result that in approximately 50 per cent of such cases the sputum is converted from positive to negative, eliminating a large number of foci of infection from the community. As a consequence of this program the mortality from this disease has dropped from a rate of 337 per 100,000 population in 1933 to a rate of 258 during the year 1939, a decrease of 23 per cent.

According to studies made by the Insular Health Department, 10 per cent of the urban and 5 per cent of the rural population have a positive serology for

syphilis. With the extension to Puerto Rico of the benefits of the La Follette-Bulwinkle Act, together with an appropriation of the Insular Legislature, it has been possible to operate 35 dispensaries throughout the Island for the diagnosis and treatment of venereal disease patients. Approximately one-half million complement-fixation and flocculation tests for the diagnosis of syphilis were performed last year, and not less than 20,000 indigent persons received treatment for which they could not afford to pay.

The large majority of the inhabitants in the rural districts earn wages which are entirely inadequate to provide their families with food, shelter, and other elementary needs of civilized people. Because of this fact, approximately 50 per cent of the homes in rural communities have no sanitary facilities, the soil contamination contributing to the spread of hookworm and other filth-borne diseases. In coöperation with the Works Progress Administration, the Insular Health Department is carrying out a project to provide rural homes of indigent persons with sanitary privies. During a period of approximately two years, 24,000 such privies have been constructed in 18 factories and distributed to indigent persons.

With 90 per cent of the families of this Island receiving an income of less than \$500 per year per family, medical care to the underprivileged has to be a responsibility of the government. Up to 1938 such care was provided in municipal hospitals which lacked the necessary equipment and trained personnel required by modern medical standards. Because of this fact, a program has been formulated for the centralization of such services in the Insular Government and provision has been made for seven large district hospitals with a capacity of 300 beds each, including services of surgery, medicine, obstetrics, and pediatrics. Four of these

hospitals have already been constructed, three of which have been adequately equipped and are in full operation. Equipment for the fourth hospital is being purchased at the present time and it will begin to function in the near future.

With the extension to the Island of the benefits of Titles V and VI of the Social Security Act, funds became available for the expansion of the public health program. Additional prenatal and infant hygiene clinics were opened in several municipalities, providing added facilities greatly needed for the care of infants and expectant mothers; part-time dentists were added to the staff of local health units in ten municipalities; two mobile dental units were purchased which are being used in rural districts; orthopedic care is being provided to the crippled; a nutrition program is being developed and additional public health nurses, social workers, laboratory technicians, and sanitarians have been employed to expand the scope of the local health unit program.

In connection with national defense numerous activities are being developed by the Insular Health Department to protect the armed forces stationed on the Island. A large part of the physical examinations carried out among the draftees were performed by members of the Health Department staff; blood tests have been made among 20,248 selectees, and those that showed a positive serology are receiving adequate treatment in the clinics in order to restore them to the service in the army; a total of 9,805 x-ray films of the chest have been taken among men who passed the physical examination for army duty in the local boards of the Selective Service, in order to eliminate the physically unfit, and malaria control work is being carried out intensively in the neighborhood of army camps to protect the health of the armed forces.

Because of its geographical location,

its vast culture acquired during past centuries, the bilingual advantages of its people as well as its political and scientific connections with the United States, Puerto Rico is especially well suited to act as an aid to continental solidarity and to serve as a meeting ground for inter-American conferences. To this end the first Inter-American Institute for Hospital Administrators was held in San Juan during the period December 1-13, 1940, under the auspices of the American College of Hospital Administrators and the American Hospital Association, and in coöperation with the University of Puerto Rico, the Insular Department of Health, the Puerto Rico Medical Association, the School of Tropical Medicine, the Territorial Charities Board, and the Puerto Rico Hospital Council. Distinguished visitors from the continent as well as

representatives from seven South and Central American republics participated in the conference.

I am confident that the foundation of a public health association in Puerto Rico will be a useful step in achieving high professional levels. It also will contribute to a higher standard of work and to make the particular health problems of the Island better known and better understood in the continental United States.

Healthy citizens are the foundation of a strong nation. In the present national emergency the Puerto Rico Department of Health will use every means available to improve the stamina of the people, adding its efforts to the national program and coöperating in the task of making the nation a stronger and healthier champion of democratic institutions.